

# Alcibiades

## A Dialogue Utilizing the Dialectic as a Mode of Psychotherapy for Alcoholism

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*Persons of the Dialogue:* SOCRATES; ALCIBIADES

**SOCRATES:** Greetings to you, friend Alcibiades! I see you have recovered from your celebration at the festival of the Urban Dionysia and, by the gods, I did think you surpassed even your previous achievements in drinking. It seems you drank with the passion of Dionysus himself. Were you able to participate in the procession and see the new image of Dionysus as it was brought from the temple in the Namaeon to the outer Kerameikos? I, myself, was delighted with the procession. The costumes depicting the Bacchantes and nymphs were as beautiful, if not more so, as the sacrifices to Dionysus at the sixteen altars. I looked for you at sunset during the Feast of the Pitchers, but I couldn't find you anywhere.

**ALCIBIADES:** That Feast is on the second day of the Festival and by that time I was celebrating my own drunkenness. I missed seeing the new image and must have been somewhere, but I

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don't remember where.

**SOCRATES:** Did you miss the dramatic contests? They were held, you know, on the following day of Anthesteria.

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, I missed them, though I might have been there and am now unable to relate the events.

**SOCRATES:** Your devotion to the “twice-born” Dionysus knows no bounds, yet I wonder if this is the way to become like the gods. Tell me, Alcibiades, do you think you can be this devoted

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without losing more than you receive? I would like to know if you have felt those divine qualities befitting a companion of the gods.

**ALCIBIADES:** It seems, as I now look back, that long ago I did experience those feeling-states of the gods; but lately, the demonic seizes me rather than the divine. When I start drinking, moderation and restraint are left at home and I have suffered severely because of this. Do you know, Socrates, that after I begin drinking, it seems as if a demon seizes me and compels me to drink on and on until sickness overtakes me, forcing me to stop. I am powerless before this force. It sweeps me into another world where I hear and see visions; some of a beatific nature, but more often than not, of frightening figures. And through all of this I am compelled, after taking the first drink. I do not know if I have been chosen by Dionysus or cursed by demons, but under its powerful hold I have sacrificed everything, including my possessions, wife and chariot. I have been told by the physician, Pausanias, that according to the teachings of Aesculapius, there is no cure for this sickness, and have also been told this by those who make a special study of the psyche.

**SOCRATES:** I must plead ignorance for I do not know of their teachings, but I have been told that they call themselves the students of the psyche because of their respect and love for the trials of Psyche. Would you indulge me by resting here for a while to tell me of their doctrines?

**ALCIBIADES:** This is a pleasant place and it does look like it is just made for conversation. Let me say, then, that these men hold to the notion that man will remain in ignorance and have great sorrow in his life, unless he recognizes the difficulties involved in the worship of new deities or in resting one's conduct on myths. The trouble rests, they say, in not being aware of the hold that the old gods have upon man. You see, if a man seeks to worship before a new deity, he must first rid himself of the powerful influence of the old gods. Unless this is done, they say, mighty conflicts will be fought within man's psyche. The gods will battle to keep or gain control, and

during this struggle, the life of man is plagued; the new gods often hold the tongue, while the old gods cling to the breast. The students of the psyche showed me that while I offered sacrifices and performed ritual ceremonies to Dionysus, I failed to realize my soul was still possessed by the son of the Blue Nymph Leiriope, Narcissus. They also led me to be-

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lieve that my confused actions can be explained by my strong tie to Oedipus who “murdered his sire and forced his dame.” Surely, Socrates, you must have heard of these notions before?

**SOCRATES:** Only slightly, for they are told secretly and then, I have heard, only after first being sure the company will accept these notions. Was it your good fortune to study with these men and to learn further of their teachings?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, Socrates, I talked with these men at length, studied with them and fully explored this matter. At times I can even sound like them, but I must confess to you that at other times my head turns dizzy at their utterances. Another thing they have impressed upon me, and that is that your rational techniques can never aid me since my problem is outside the scope of your dialectical skill.

**SOCRATES:** I have often wondered about the claims they make for their doctrine. If their teachings were indeed true I would devote all my time to the study of these matters even if it meant becoming one of their disciples. I would even abandon my passion for philosophy, as a young man must leave the toys and games of his youth. I think I would offend the gods if I did not examine what you say for, as you know, I am under a strict command of the Delphic Oracle to seek out the wise and to test their knowledge. I think I should rush over to talk to them now to learn more of their beliefs, but that would leave you to continue in your distress; and since you too are the problem, I think I should first turn my attention to you, my friend. Let us say, then, that you speak as freely as you have in the past, for great matters are at stake here. Let your answers be brief and speak as honestly and sincerely as befits your nature.

**ALCIBIADES:** Now, Socrates, are you suggesting I do not speak truthfully and honestly?

**SOCRATES:** Heavens, you should not accuse me of such a thing or think that I would impute that of you. My only concern is to caution you to express yourself only after careful reflection and to equal it by your choice of words.

**ALCIBIADES:** Let me shorten this discussion, for I exaggerate the extent of my problem. You see, when I return to my sober mind, as I am now, Socrates, I have no desire to drink and, therefore, believe I should not bother you. But, if you prefer to continue, and I see you are quite intent

upon proceeding, I will briefly explain

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myself. Let me tell you from the beginning what has happened to me and explain the nature of my drinking, and even you will see my reasons are justified.

**SOCRATES:** You must excuse me for being rude and interrupting you, but I am confused by your remarks. You say your reasons are justified, yet I presume you desire to halt those actions which are based on what you call justified reasons. Now, would not any man follow his reasons if he truly thought them justified?

**ALCIBIADES:** Sometimes, as with this moment, I begin to believe the remarks they make about you, Socrates, when they say all you do is quibble about words and twist one's meaning. You know very well what I mean. I admit I know the reasons for my drinking but feel powerless before those impulses and desires.

**SOCRATES:** It may be that I am guilty of “quibbling” because I am aware of the way our acts reflect the understanding and how our views and ideas are the verbal expression of the understanding. Homer says, you remember, “Confusion in one’s life mirrors the mind.” Thus, if the reasons you speak of are justified, would not the impulses and desires be a thing to respect? It seems you drink, have good reasons for doing so, and neither seek a cure nor are you in need of one. However, I have seen you the object of ridicule, condemnation and abuse, and have heard you on more than one occasion condemn yourself for your excesses. I can neither agree with what you say nor do I think you really mean what you say. Let us discuss what you recall about this matter. In the past, it was your manner to search intensely for answers; and, of this I am very sure, whatever you may do, the result will be determined by whether or not you can reenter that frame of mind.

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes. it has been a long time, perhaps too long a time, and I did enjoy our discussions, but can one return again to a former age. recapture enthusiasm and, even if I must admit it, sincerity?

**SOCRATES:** Would you expect to decide now for the future, or to make your expectations the basis for our present conduct, when we know so little of what we may or may not do? We cannot pass a judgement as if we were lawmakers to hold fast to the moment. Ours must be a more limited end. We must, rather, agree, just you and I, to try to bring your basic ideas into discussion, and to test their value here and now; and if we find them of value, to extend them in our dealings with our fellow man, for is that not the only legislation the philosopher can enact?

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**ALCIBIADES:** It is a hard thing you ask of me. I will try because in the past I remember you used to act as a catalyst on my soul. Let me then say I drink and can't stop after starting although I would like to stop and would give anything to be free of this.

**SOCRATES:** Shades of the past! Your speech reminds me of our former times. Tell me, do you seek relief from drinking, or from the evils that accompany its excesses?

**ALCIBIADES:** If I could drink without suffering the ill effects, I would prefer that state.

**SOCRATES:** Then you would rather drink than remain sober, if the ills could be cured?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, that would be desired.

**SOCRATES:** Are you certain that once you start drinking you will be unable to stop the consequences that follow? How sure are you of this?

**ALCIBIADES:** Very sure.

**SOCRATES:** Then you either desire an impossible state or do not know that the consequences truly follow. Now, answer carefully. Which is correct?

**ALCIBIADES:** I fear I see the disagreeable truth but would prefer it otherwise.

**SOCRATES:** Then you say you want to drink but do not like the consequences that ultimately must follow.

**ALCIBIADES:** As it shows madness, it is my position and I feel it accurately reflects my present dilemma. What can you do, Socrates? Will you show me the folly of my position when I already admit it? Will you accuse me of madness when I am only too much aware of it? ... Or could it be possible that you can help me?

**SOCRATES:** Oh, friend Alcibiades, I fear I should have gone to speak to your teachers and left you as I intended a short while ago. Your challenge makes my head dizzy and spins me into the void. What you set before me is nothing less than a Herculean task which would have demanded the utmost of any man in his prime, yet you freely set it for me to scale. Since this is no easy task, you must match my effort with your watchfulness and attention, for I feel that this is something requiring the strength and wisdom of not just I alone but you, too, Alcibiades.

Will you then join me, making sure at each step that I have your full approval, or we may have to return again by the same path and scale the same heights until such agreement is reached.

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**ALCIBIADES:** Socrates, I seem to feel some of the old enthusiasm returning. I will certainly try to be a match, for I think you are right and I wonder if I have been in error in not discussing this with you earlier than I have. But what can you do?

**SOCRATES:** Well, I cannot stop you from drinking, nor can I prescribe a magic potion to allow you to drink without ill effects; nor can I cure you of your desire for wine. But what we can do, and this is not a small thing, you will see, is to direct our attention to the way you understand your dilemma, to see if things are as you say. As we have said before, there are great things at stake here, and is it not true that “sacrifices must equal mighty challenges or success may escape us?” Let us, then, begin anew. Tell me, as you understand it, what has happened to interrupt your periods of sobriety?

**ALCIBIADES:** Tensions, Socrates, build up and I retreat into drink to rid myself of them.

**SOCRATES:** I have often heard that this is true, yet I wonder if in truth it happens that way. When you are sober you experience periods of tensions, do you not?

**ALCIBIADES:** True.

**SOCRATES:** Could it be that there is another factor present?

**ALCIBIADES:** I don’t know what you mean.

**SOCRATES:** Listen closely, then. Relate to me what you thought or said just before you took the first drink.

**ALCIBIADES:** Well, let me see. I was very tense, as I said before, and I recall saying “To hades with it” and then took a drink from a wine flask.

**SOCRATES:** Would you say your expression, “To hades with it,” very closely typifies what you said or thought on previous occasions?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, but I do not see the importance of this remark.

**SOCRATES:** What is “it”?

**ALCIBIADES:** Tension, I guess.

**SOCRATES:** No, you said you experience tensions but do not always have recourse to wine. It must either indicate the breaking point or saturation point of tension, or of something else.

**ALCIBIADES:** I do not know what to say.

**SOCRATES:** You are sober, have tensions, say “To hades with it,” and drink. Think, now, what do you think “it” could be?

**ALCIBIADES:** Everything.

**SOCRATES:** Everything except drinking?

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**ALCIBIADES:** Why, yes.

**SOCRATES:** Then are you saying, “To hades with sobriety”?

**ALCIBIADES:** I am not sure, but I think that is correct.

**SOCRATES:** Its correctness argues another fact and sends echoes back to me of something I heard many years ago—from whom I cannot remember, though it must have been Prodicus or some other wise sage—concerning the teachings of the Corybantes. As I recall, the Corybantes performed many ceremonies and rites to keep from what they called “pathologos.” It was their belief that the Athenians rose from barbarism but can easily return again to their former life of strife and turmoil if they fail to control what previously kept them in chains. Some men point to the laws, others to commerce or to our education as the source of the liberating force from barbarism, but the Corybantes say it is speech itself for, they claim, it lies at the base of all of man’s achievements. To retain this advantage, the Corybantes realized they must teach man that he has two languages, one learned from the market-place and the other that he has spun for himself; and he must be taught ways of distinguishing these languages, for unless man can do this, he will become the victim of all sorts of calamities and misfortunes. Unless one’s language is purified, they say, philosophy will forever close her doors to man. Indeed, I do think that this is similar to our often repeated remark, “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Did you know that the purification rites of the Corybantes insisted upon the initiate stripping his

language of private meanings and interpretations, as much as man can, and part of their rites included long conversations with the masters to test and insure this fact? Certainly, Alcibiades, you will agree that no sense can be made of either man or the world until man examines the contents of his own mind so as to be free of this pathologos?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, I agree, but why do they call it pathologos?

**SOCRATES:** Because both languages use the same words and are. therefore, difficult to distinguish and separate, and it often happens that the speaker may be intending one meaning while those who listen will understand another meaning. Communication and learning become impossible and chaos follows. The Corybantes called this confusion “sick-speech,” or pathologos. It is possible, they thought, to recognize this sickness because the pathological term would have about it private or personal meanings which tend to cluster about the word. Strangely enough the cluster of meanings

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has at least one term which is close to the common usage and therefore it is not always an easy thing to identify and cure. Though it may be obscure and a hidden thing, it exerts a force upon man’s life and is the source of much suffering.

**ALCIBIADES:** I can see how it could happen, and as interesting as your story is, Socrates, I do not see how it applies to me.

**SOCRATES:** Listening to what you say I realize your confusion may be something similar to pathologos.

**ALCIBIADES:** There may be confusion in my mind, I do not doubt that, but it is clearly a result, not a cause, of my drinking.

**SOCRATES:** Perhaps you are correct in your view, but first let us examine this matter further. Confusion is often the end result of many things each of which should be closely looked at.

**ALCIBIADES:** Socrates, the confusion I speak of is not a matter of mere words because I know the confusion is real.

**SOCRATES:** And, I think, one can be certain it will remain a confusion if not put into words. Come, you have done very well thus far. Let your answers fit the mood and try to dispel the confusion.

**ALCIBIADES:** I can assure you, Socrates, that I can give answers, but I do not think it would be as



you might want. Any answer I might give, I feel, would be merely idle speculation, as if the views did not belong to me; and if the truth be known, the whole point leaves me uneasy and slightly perplexed. At times, you see, I am not sure I know what I mean. You don't understand this and I think only another wine drinker could.

**SOCRATES:** Do you have any difficulty drinking wine?

**ALCIBIADES:** Of course not!

**SOCRATES:** The difficulty you experience is in stopping, is it not?

**ALCIBIADES:** Certainly.

**SOCRATES:** Would those who have been unable to either stop or control the drinking be able to help another do what they themselves are unable to do?

**ALCIBIADES:** I imagine not.

**SOCRATES:** Can you, or anyone else, control or stop what he does not know, or of what he is ignorant? Would not the difficulty in controlling anything be immeasurably increased if we did not understand it and remained confused about it?

**ALCIBIADES:** I think you are right again.

**SOCRATES:** No, I am not right. Rather, the idea meets with your understanding.

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**ALCIBIADES:** Can things be so neat and clean? Perhaps they can, but I sometimes feel that you forget and ignore the importance of feelings and spend too much time chasing notions and trying to straighten out ideas. The matter is very simple. I say what I mean and it is you who confuse me. If you just accept what I say, I am sure you will understand. When I say "To hades with it." I mean just that. Is there any need to examine it further?

**SOCRATES:** Whatever the "it" is, it cannot be separated from how you understand it. I can know things by relating them to other things, but I can only understand ideas. Again, it is you who have the problem, not the "it," hence we should return to that point. From your admission, we discovered that the "it" was sobriety: therefore, the question is: Why send it to hades?

**ALCIBIADES:** I'm not sure I know how to answer your question.

**SOCRATES:** Would you say there are some things that are valuable in their own right and others that are not valued in themselves but for other things? Would you agree that money, coins and the like are not prized for themselves, but for the things that can be exchanged for them, and, in general, anything used is used for other things?

**ALCIBIADES:** Certainly.

**SOCRATES:** Would you classify sobriety with things valuable because of other things?

**ALCIBIADES:** I imagine you want me to say sobriety is valuable because of other things.

**SOCRATES:** Do you say that, Alcibiades, because you think I am going to force you to some conclusion of my own? Or to lead you into a contradiction as the eristic reasoners do in order to make you an object of jest or to make me feel stronger because of your weakness?

**ALCIBIADES:** At times I think so, but it isn't that I really believe this, but the thought keeps returning to me when we discuss this matter. Let's say I am suspicious and a little in fear of your questions.

**SOCRATES:** Have you forgotten I am the son of Phaenarte, a midwife, and have attended those pregnant of the soul?

**ALCIBIADES:** I have heard Theaetetus, the son of Euphronius the Sunian, call you that and he often spoke of your art.

**SOCRATES:** Then you should know I assist souls when they are in labor, and Theaetetus must have mentioned that the triumph

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of my art is not in just bringing to birth difficult notions, but in examining whether the new thought is a true birth or a false image and idol. But did you know that I can practice my art only under strict conditions? For when you realize this, you will see that you have nothing to fear. Truly, I have been commanded by the gods to add nothing to the birth process and the word of the gods, you know, I hold as a sacred trust. Further, friend Alcibiades, being a midwife, I am beyond giving birth, past any need to bring to birth my own notions. I know only enough to question, and thus can bring nothing which is in fact of my own invention. Now listen carefully, Alcibiades, for you are in labor and the idea you are struggling with is a new

thing and therefore strange. Its strangeness should be no basis for you to judge its merits for you must live with a new notion, nurture it and then see if it is a true and noble birth. Remember, too, a new-born thought needs no less care and attention than its human counterpart, and as bodies grow strong and well proportioned by exercise and care, so do ideas. Now if sobriety is valued for other things, what are they? And how do you determine what they are?

**ALCIBIADES:** There is no mystery about this, Socrates, you need look no deeper than what you see. Look and notice my friends and see what they have. I know if I were like them, sober or able to control the wine, I too could have what they have.

**SOCRATES:** Tell me, then, what you think you would have.

**ALCIBIADES:** First of all I would have better health; would think clearer than I do now; would look better and enjoy a sense of well-being.

**SOCRATES:** What else?

**ALCIBIADES:** I think recognition would be included, and being as good as the next; proving myself; being among the top and being able to talk easily, having no tensions and the like.

**SOCRATES:** Would you say these ideas are grouped together?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, strangely enough, they are.

**SOCRATES:** They seem to be a cluster or a grouping, would you agree?

**ALCIBIADES:** They do seem to be a cluster. They seem to hover about the word “sobriety” and lend it its meaning. Could it be, then, a pathologos term?

**SOCRATES:** It does appear as such, doesn’t it?

**ALCIBIADES:** True, it seems that way.

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**SOCRATES:** Let us look at it closely and see all its parts. Would you agree the cluster is an admirable list of qualities? And also a desirable list?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, I would.

**SOCRATES:** Then it is not this you send to hades?

**ALCIBIADES:** No, I guess not, especially since [ would like to possess them.

**SOCRATES:** Now, would you describe how you feel when you start drinking.

**ALCIBIADES:** Elated and contented with myself. There is a sense of well-being. I'm at ease, talk freely, feel on top of the world and, if I must admit it, feel quite courageous and brave.

**SOCRATES:** Is the description of this state different from the "cluster of meaning" of sobriety?

**ALCIBIADES:** Why, no, it doesn't seem that way, does it?

**SOCRATES:** What happened to the tensions?

**ALCIBIADES:** They were gone with the first drink.

**SOCRATES:** I think we are going too fast. What is the difference between the two states—sobriety and drinking?

**ALCIBIADES:** Why, hold on! I guess... no, that couldn't be right, but it does sound right. Could it be that I think I should be getting these qualities from sobriety and, finding that I do not. I get disgusted and find it in wine. Does that sound right?

**SOCRATES:** If so, it should be clearer. Can you describe the nature of the build-up of tensions?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, I think so. I begin to get restless, feel uneasy, and I begin to think the other fellow is a little better than I am. He looks bigger, I feel smaller. Everything begins to appear out of order. It is very difficult to describe.

**SOCRATES:** Would you say these thoughts and their accompanying feelings increase as you approach your first drink?

**ALCIBIADES:** Surely.

**SOCRATES:** Because you are not finding what you wanted or what you thought should be in the

state or condition of sobriety?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, I think that is correct.

**SOCRATES:** Why do you expect these things from sobriety?

**ALCIBIADES:** Others have these things through sobriety, don't they?

**SOCRATES:** Is it, rather, that they gain them through it, but do not have them because of it?  
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**ALCIBIADES:** I'm not sure I follow you.

**SOCRATES:** Either sobriety has these things in it, as part of its nature, or it is merely one of the conditions for those things.

**ALCIBIADES:** Merely! I would say sobriety is the very condition, for without sobriety you have nothing. And this is what I can't achieve.

**SOCRATES:** And you can't achieve it because it is not there to achieve.

**ALCIBIADES:** What?

**SOCRATES:** Not to drink is to be sober. What you do with your sobriety determines what you achieve. Do you think because you have the condition for a thing, it is equal to having the thing? Would you say because you have wine, you are drunk?

**ALCIBIADES:** No.

**SOCRATES:** Then you admit you must do something else?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, drink it.

**SOCRATES:** What you do with sobriety depends upon what you achieve in sobriety?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, that seems to follow.

**SOCRATES:** And not in just being sober?

**ALCIBIADES:** True.

**SOCRATES:** You keep expecting these things in sobriety, and when you don't find them, you experience a sense of loss which you describe as being "tense." Is that correct?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, I think so, because I get the feeling that being sober isn't worth it if it can't give me what I want.

**SOCRATES:** And what you want is what you expect sobriety to give you?

**ALCIBIADES:** I believe that is close.

**SOCRATES:** Again, is sobriety capable of giving what you want or merely the condition for it? Let me ask this in another way. If sobriety is merely the possibility for these things, then will you insure its possession by merely being sober?

**ALCIBIADES:** I imagine not. I should give this more thought.

**SOCRATES:** But what you want and do is limited and of short duration whenever tenseness sets in.

**ALCIBIADES:** True, for when I feel tense I feel consumed with bitterness, frustration and annoyance. With one drink, Socrates. I can sweep all this away and feel like mighty Zeus himself.

**SOCRATES:** Can you be bitter, frustrated and annoyed without

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there being something about which you are bitter, annoyed and frustrated?

**ALCIBIADES:** No, I imagine not. If forced to name an "object," I would say it is everything and everybody. It permeates and engulfs everything.

**SOCRATES:** And then the drink.

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, and then I am no longer what I was. I become something and they become as unimportant as shadows.

**SOCRATES:** Should we admit, then, that this is what you called the "feeling-state of the gods"?

**ALCIBIADES:** Without any doubt—of this there can be no question, Socrates, for there is nothing I feel I cannot do better or nothing dangerous that I could not undertake after a few cups of wine. I also have a sense of pleasantness and a feeling of superiority when drinking.

**SOCRATES:** I am very impressed with these qualities and surely we should call them virtues, should we not?

**ALCIBIADES:** Certainly.

**SOCRATES:** Then you not only enjoy the wine, but achieve what is often considered to be the hardest and most difficult possession to acquire—virtue. This is, indeed, a great discovery, for if it is as you say, then you should address the crowds and proclaim your discovery. Tell me, Alcibiades, can it truly give courage to the coward and transform him into a warrior of noble stature?

**ALCIBIADES:** I think you are jesting, but I will reply anyway. Yes, it can do that and much more. It can loosen the tongue and rest the spirit, but above all it can and does give courage to all who partake of it.

**SOCRATES:** You have answered like the true son of Cleinias and Dinomache, but recall that one can jest seriously and sport in earnest. Tell me, then, for I would understand this matter further, what is the feeling of courage without the wine?

**ALCIBIADES:** Now this is another typical question of yours.

**SOCRATES:** I see I must journey the long route, even though I thought I saw a short-cut to our discussion. However, the long way is often better if two journey together.

**ALCIBIADES:** Very true, and leave nothing out.

**SOCRATES:** Let me ask, then, if you grant that there is a difference between courage and fearlessness or foolhardiness.

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, there is a difference ... everyone will grant that

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distinction, but at the moment I forget on what basis it is made. Do you remember, Socrates?

**SOCRATES:** If I could remember, I think I would be at fault merely to recall it, because the test of knowing, and of making such distinctions as this, lies in being able to use every occasion to experience it as a new and fresh intuition rather than only as a remembered thing.

**ALCIBIADES:** I will try to remember this, Socrates.

**SOCRATES:** Now, Alcibiades, would you say that a man of courage shows his courage during dangerous circumstances?

**ALCIBIADES:** Surely, that would be easily agreed upon.

**SOCRATES:** And would you agree that a man who was foolhardy was so because he acted fearlessly and did not recognize dangers?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, and I would add that often a brave man is fearful, yet he is pushed ahead into battle by his fear.

**SOCRATES:** So that it appears the fearless man is ignorant of dangers. And would you agree that the crowd may call his actions courageous, but we, seeking to judge the nature of his psyche, would call him foolish?

**ALCIBIADES:** Certainly we would.

**SOCRATES:** Then for the courageous man not to be foolish, he would have to be aware of present dangers as well as those he may encounter in the future. Would you agree?

**ALCIBIADES:** Of course.

**SOCRATES:** Surely, then, if the wine drinker has courage to match a situation, he must be aware of its present and future dangers.

**ALCIBIADES:** Perhaps.

**SOCRATES:** Could you tell me something again?

**ALCIBIADES:** I don't think I am going to like this, but go on.

**SOCRATES:** Are you now disturbed about your drinking because you have been getting into



difficulties as well as being a little troubled because of what you see ahead of you in the future?

**ALCIBIADES:** True enough.

**SOCRATES:** Then would you say in regard to drinking that you are in a dangerous situation and you are uncertain of which way to turn?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes.

**SOCRATES:** Then, when you are drinking, you say you have courage, but you are not aware of the dangerous nature of your drinking nor of the difficult circumstances either present or in

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the future. Yet you continue drinking. Is this courage, or is it foolhardiness?

**ALCIBIADES:** I have been wanting to say something for some time, but I allowed you to continue this little logic chopping. Listen, Socrates, I tell you I am fearless and courageous when I drink. I know this because I feel it. This is as real as anything and gives its own reality, and is not dependent upon some arbitrary reasoning regardless of whether you think it is foolhardiness or not.

**SOCRATES:** I wouldn't deny that you experience those feelings. only why do you say it is courage? When we examined it together you agreed all the way, step by step, did you not?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, I did, but I feel you fail to recognize that there is a feeling at the base of this and it is not what you are analyzing.

**SOCRATES:** Then why call it courage?

**ALCIBIADES:** Perhaps I shouldn't, but it comes very close to it and in its absence, it will do.

**SOCRATES:** Let us look at it, then. We should draw together your previous admissions and look at the result.

**ALCIBIADES:** Fair enough.

**SOCRATES:** Well, then, the state you experience gives you the feeling you desire, and during this condition you have no knowledge of present or future dangers and act directly without such reflection. Now doesn't this amount to acting without considering the consequences and not

caring what happens?

**ALCIBIADES:** Go on and say it. It is a feeling of “to hades with it.”

**SOCRATES:** And the “it,” here, is all the present and future consequences and circumstances of your drinking.

**ALCIBIADES:** True, if I must admit it.

**SOCRATES:** Now when you reach this state of feeling, you say “to hades with it” and with everything else. Having achieved this, why must you continue drinking? Why do you call for more and more wine?

**ALCIBIADES:** Tension, I was going to say, Socrates, but I don’t think I have the full intent of your question.

**SOCRATES:** You drink to reduce tensions, then after a few drinks, the tensions are reduced and you experience feelings of elation, well-being and superiority. Is that not correct?

**ALCIBIADES:** True. But I suspect we may have to call them by other names, as we found with the term courage.

**SOCRATES:** Very good. Alcibiades. try to do this yourself and

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tell me what you would call them and allow me to hear your thoughts.

**ALCIBIADES:** Well, now, to begin, I will say that the feeling of superiority is very real. It is not a superior feeling in regard to any art, skill or study, but in relation to other men.

**SOCRATES:** Would you say it is because you feel they are now inferior?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, in a way that is correct, but it is more than that because it is beyond their being right or wrong that I feel superior. After a few cups of wine you get the feeling that you don't care whether you are right or wrong, don't care what happens, feel as you would like to be, and have the strength to be as you truly are. You have lost the miserable feelings and the burdens of responsibilities you never wanted and, because of this, have a feeling of well-being. Now if I can look at it again, perhaps I can rethink it in new terms. Essentially it seems that the terms measure my feelings because it is what I want. I suspect, upon reflection, that they

will not stand up to close examination. I really see they don't, Socrates, but I am not sure just how to create that shift to render them clear and unambiguous. This is strange because I half see they don't fit but am unable to transform them.

**SOCRATES:** Would you say these feelings are not separate and distinct? Would you say that they really seem to constellate about something which seems like many but that you suspect is really only one?

**ALCIBIADES:** Oh no... not again!

**SOCRATES:** You must be careful and not take the hints I offer unless they really fit the case. But if you do so, it is not final and fixed. All it will mean is that for the present your understanding leads you to a conclusion, and if at a later time you desire to express it differently, it will be a new thing to understand.

**ALCIBIADES:** I will grant that, if you will allow me to return some later time to that point for another look. Agreed?

**SOCRATES:** Of course, for a continued conversation is the very essence of a philosophical life. But now take courage and answer the problem. What are these feelings?

**ALCIBIADES:** Let me say it is irresponsibility, because I left responsibilities. It is neither superiority nor inferiority, because all standards are gone when drinking, but it is elation without anything to be elated about.

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**SOCRATES:** Then is it elation or oblivion?

**ALCIBIADES:** I guess I should call it a temporary state of contented oblivion. I know when I am sober that it is a poor escape, because more problems are created by drinking. But it is an escape, and when I am drinking it gives me a feeling of being able to conquer all problems anytime, any place, and so I feel contented.

**SOCRATES:** After reaching this objective, why continue drinking?

**ALCIBIADES:** You don't understand. Socrates. After that point I feel compelled to drink further on and on.

**SOCRATES:** Do you drink?

**ALCIBIADES:** Of course I drink. What kind of a question is that?

**SOCRATES:** During your drinking, do you know you are drinking? Or would you say someone else is doing your drinking?

**ALCIBIADES:** What are you asking? Of course I am doing the drinking. Surely you do not think someone else is doing my drinking, whatever that might mean.

**SOCRATES:** Unless you are willing to admit you become someone else, I am unable to understand you. The “you” that drinks is the same “you” who previously was sober. Yet, you told me, you become like the gods. If you are sure it is “you” that drinks, then you are still aware of yourself. Being aware of yourself, as yourself, you must have some remembrance of your former state in spite of the feelings transporting you into another world. Tell me, now, remember with the care of a man who must recall a priceless possession he has mislaid. ... When you are drinking, do you have a lingering thought that returns you to images of your former self?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, in a strange way there is always that disturbing element carrying memories of the past which I would prefer to forget. Most often it is only a whisper. It is faint and goes unnoticed.

**SOCRATES:** But not too unnoticed?

**ALCIBIADES:** No. When it is persistent I just reach for another pitcher of wine and if that doesn't work, I reduce the ratio.

**SOCRATES:** What is your favorite ratio? Years ago I knew you enjoyed the popular Athens mixture of one part wine to six parts water. What is it now?

**ALCIBIADES:** I should blush to mention it, but I have gone from six to four to three, and lately I have even become like the barbarians, with one to one.

**SOCRATES:** With even that extreme measure, were you able to silence your thoughts of yourself?  
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**ALCIBIADES:** Oh, I imagine so, but then I do not know for sure because I frequently pass out and can't remember.

**SOCRATES:** These unpleasant memories, are they of the nature of a loss or failure, defeat or humiliation? Have they been done or been caused by you?

**ALCIBIADES:** I am not sure I follow your meaning.

**SOCRATES:** You and I were with the Army at Potidaea and we suffered defeat at the hands of the Spartans. Insofar as we fought bravely and with courage, our defeat could not be humiliation. But even if we had been victorious but you and I were cowards, our victory would be a hollow one. Do you agree?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, I see what you mean. I don't think that these memories were caused by me, but rather they have roots in my drunkenness.

**SOCRATES:** When these thoughts occur, how then do you answer them?

**ALCIBIADES:** To hades with it all! There it is again, the same phrase. I thought we were done with it.

**SOCRATES:** You are beginning to see the range of the pathologos, for is hydra-headed. Now, again, to what does the "it" refer?

**ALCIBIADES:** It is a tribute to my own self-pity, my ignorance and my frustrations.

**SOCRATES:** Now it is I who fail to understand. Listen, you say you experience a sense of contented oblivion and yet these thoughts bring with them much confusion and they also fester and create pain. How can that be?

**ALCIBIADES:** That is difficult to answer. You see, the drink makes me feel contented, but recollections of the past make me miserable.

**SOCRATES:** And then?

**ALCIBIADES:** I call for some more wine.

**SOCRATES:** Until?

**ALCIBIADES:** Until I can silence these thoughts or pass into unconsciousness.

**SOCRATES:** But can you silence those thoughts and yet remain unconscious?

**ALCIBIADES:** No. When I try to enjoy my wine, past memories intrude themselves.

**SOCRATES:** Does the wine ever really fulfill your expectations?

**ALCIBIADES:** On the morning after, when I am shaking and ill,  
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a cup of wine can quickly restore me. Certainly it can do that, and that is when I truly need it most.

**SOCRATES:** I imagine properties of wine must have within them certain medicinal elements, making this possible, but our concern is not with the wine but to review the condition that created the need for the wine in the first place. If these thoughts cannot be drowned or silenced by wine, perhaps they are related in some way to the tensions, or do you still think you can eliminate them through drinking?

**ALCIBIADES:** No, but it always feels good to be master over them, instead of feeling crushed by them, if for only a short time.

**SOCRATES:** So you drink to relieve immediate tensions and frustrations, only to find that this seems to release bitter memories of earlier failures and disappointments. And since you drink to eclipse this type of feeling, you must keep drinking or recognize the distasteful truth that wine is not the solution you expected.

**ALCIBIADES:** You know, Socrates, in a way that is true, but I always expect to recapture the feeling I once had when I first started drinking wine. It was a happy, glowing feeling, and I could always stop when I wanted to; but now, needless to say, it controls me. It seems that no matter what experiences I have gone through, I always hope that this time I can resume control, but each time I suffer defeat.

**SOCRATES:** Then you know from your past experiences that you have lost control, but it is a hard lesson to learn. It seems that it is difficult to give up wine because you have used it for so long a time. Is that so?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, it has become the most important thing in my life and I rely upon it continuously, dream of it and use any excuse in order to obtain and continue using it. I would

say I have lived with it for many years as a close companion and constant friend.

**SOCRATES:** And now you are contemplating a separation?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes.

**SOCRATES:** In the wine you sought an aid in all your difficulties, and now the thought of going without your friend must entail uncertainty. I think I can see that you must have wavered many times before arriving at this decision.

**ALCIBIADES:** Wavered is not the word. I have sworn off wine many times in the past but each time I have returned to it. In

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fact, Socrates, if I am to tell you the truth, the thought of living without wine is a strange and at times a terrifying one for me to entertain.

**SOCRATES:** Stranger yet is the thought you expressed, for you see, do you not, that your problem here is not with the wine but how to live without it.

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, I see it very well. How does one face an ordeal like this?

**SOCRATES:** Would you say you have found that the life you have led did not just soften the blows of life but did more? It gave you a companion while you were alone. It gave you an invisible friend who has now turned against you so that now, for the first time in many years, you must really stand alone, isolated and without anything to dilute the experience of life itself.

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, that seems truer than you know. But how can one transform or change this feeling?

**SOCRATES:** I think you are asking whether there is another invisible friend capable of aiding you, as wine did in the past, but without any of the evils of the wine. Is that correct?

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, I think so.

**SOCRATES:** Then I should refer you to one of the mystery cults, the Pythagoreans, Eleusinians or Corybanteans, and you might even consider becoming an initiate, for these groups have been a friend to many men in distress. By accepting membership or being a follower in one of the groups, you will not transform these feelings of dread as swiftly as you had when drinking wine.

The results along this path are always slow and, at times, nearly imperceptible. On the other hand, if you can confront these feelings directly and alone, you will certainly need courage. Tell me, Alcibiades, you have striven to avoid these feelings of dread before, but did you nevertheless recognize them in a dim way, perhaps, as important to experience?

**ALCIBIADES:** In a haunting way, I should say, yes, for I have often felt this way about it but was never able to understand it.

**SOCRATES:** If you make a decision to stand alone, you then risk becoming wise, for it is in the nature of man, I am told by sages, to grasp this feeling and trace it to its roots. It is the very stuff that adds to beauty its beautifulness, gives to knowing its wisdom, and is the source of the good in both beauty and power.

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**ALCIBIADES:** What you are describing is as far beyond my understanding as sight is to the blind.

**SOCRATES:** And it is as far away as here and now. It is a goal, lofty and ideal, which we may strive for, and in our very efforts we may find a vision of that state in which we would like to live.

**ALCIBIADES:** Yes, I can see it as an ideal that I have run from, instead of toward.

**SOCRATES:** True enough. And you may again turn to wine-drinking, a choice that is always before you, or you can attempt the sober life with or without assistance. Or do you still think the matter is in the hands of the old and new gods, or caused by their conflict over possession of your soul?

**ALCIBIADES:** No, I do not think the matter rests with the gods, nor are my actions being influenced by myths but, rather, the issue is in how I understand myself.

**SOCRATES:** It may still be profitable to examine the relation between your actions and a myth, be it Oedipus or some other figure, for we are often not aware of the models we have chosen on which to base our actions. Let us do so.

**ALCIBIADES:** I think you have said more than enough for this day. Let us meet again and discuss it further. I think I should review what we have said and reflect upon it before going on.

**SOCRATES:** You know I always enjoy discussing such matters and I do believe you are right to



reflect upon what we have said.

**ALCIBIADES:** Where are you going now, Socrates?

**SOCRATES:** It is time for me to pay my respects to the gods and goddesses, and after that I intend to see my friends in the gymnasium in the hope of learning from them, or from some stranger who may be passing through Athens, and who may have some time to rest and discuss with me.